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Luther Bedford

Luther Bedford '59

Illinois Wesleyan University

Yvonne Jones

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Oral History Interview with Luther Bedford, November 16, 1999

Today's date is Tuesday, November 16, 1999 approximately 1:15 pm, recorded interview with Luther Bedford, Class of 1959 for the Dr. Elbert Rogers Minority Alumni Research Project.

Recording.

Yvonne Jones: Okay, Luther, first of all, I want to thank you for participating in this interview research project. I'm gonna ask you a series of questions-

Luther Bedford: - you get—do you get paid for it? ...[both laugh]...

Jones: No. I'm a strictly salary employee...[Bedford laughs]... So I'm gonna ask you a series of questions. I just want you to ... just have a conversation with me.

Bedford: All right. We'll try.

Jones: First question is, how did you decide to attend Illinois Wesleyan?

Bedford: Well, there was a – a coach by the name of Dan Larson who was my Junior High School coach and after he graduated from Junior High he went on to Illinois Wesleyan and another friend of mine, Rey Morgan and I were... wanting to go to school, so we-- Don would write us quite often and told us if we came to Wesleyan we could play both football, basketball and run track and wouldn't be like going to a big school where you're going to participate in one sport-

Jones: -mm-hmm-

Bedford: And we took him up on it and went to Wesleyan.

Jones: Well – no – are you from Chicago? What high school did you go to?

Bedford: No, I'm from Rockford. Rockford West High School

Jones: Okay

Bedford: (01:41??) teaching at the Washington Junior High School at the time.

Jones: Okay. When you look at Illinois Wesleyan, were there any other schools that you were considering at that point?

Bedford: Oh, yeah. I was – I had a – I had been offered an academic and an athletic scholarship to Drake University ... to play football, but I wanted to play football and basketball and they were telling me something about what Don had said that usually a person designated in one sport.

Jones: Hmm... okay. And at that time did you know what you were going to major in as a student.

Bedford: No, I had no idea.

Jones: No idea?

Bedford: No idea whatsoever.

Jones: Okay. How did you finally decide?

Bedford: Well, when I went there, you know you have these grandiose ideas about what you wanna be so I thought I wanted to be a lawyer-

Jones: -oh, really?

Bedford: I didn't think of anything else, to be ...[both laugh]... after a year of taking history – boring history (2:32??) I used to call them, I decided I don't think I wanna read and do all of this so I, first of all, I just decided I didn't know what I wanted to be and I would wait for a while. And then somebody suggested, Would you like to be a coach or teach Physical Ed to kids? Yeah, that'd be a good idea. So that's what I did.

Jones: Okay. Did you have any favorite professors while you were at Illinois Wesleyan that you can remember?

Bedford: Dr. Schultz was a ... I think ... my history professor ... I think Sociology or History. He was totally like a mentor... I would like ... get frustrated about things that were happening on campus and he would come forward and sort of ... make you feel at home and at least make you feel at ease at the time.

Jones: Okay. While you were a student, what was the most challenging or rewarding experience in your academic life?

Bedford: Oh, well, actually the whole ... whole – whole setup when I went to school there was a – there was a counselor that told me ...that I shouldn't be going to college, that everybody didn't have to go to college and that I was just a mediocre student so I wouldn't make it in school and that really sort of upset me. So when we did go to school, Rey and I said, well, we've decided whether to go to school or to the army, and then we said hey, why not we go somewhere, and find out what college was all about. And that's what happened.

Jones: Hmmm.

Bedford: and then the other one was ... that was when I was at Wesleyan itself. Ummm, We had – we had anatomy or physiology. It was Dr. Franz in there and she was a – she was a really hard teacher, she was getting rid of ... we thought she was getting rid of athletes because she came from University of Illinois and she had flunked a lot of athletes there so when she came to Wesleyan everybody wanted to make sure that they didn't get her for class...[giggles]... and everybody had a ... on their records of having ... having her for the class except for me. I had ... mine said Dr. White(???). I remember distinctly.... So I go in this class but it had her room

number so I go in the class and I think she was left-handed. But whatever! And she says, “anybody’s name I missed?”, I raised my hand. She said, “What name is on your?” I said, Dr. White. So she walks over and goes [gestures scribbling], writes her name in and I go ... [both laugh] Yeah I’m really – it really frightened me. And actually what happened is she just took on to me and she really liked me-

Jones: -Oh, that’s great-

Bedford: -and she really, really helped me and we’d be studying and she walked by and I’m looking for this vein or artery or whatever it was, and she walked by and sort of use her stick and pick it up, and show me where it is, and kept walking

Jones: Yeah.

Bedford: But I – I really remember her and she was really a big help. And in fact she even told me she wanted me to go ... to Med school.

Jones: Mm-hmm.

Bedford: I said, Med school? That’s all.... I don’t know what that means. She says – I think I was a junior at the time- she says, it’ll only be four years. I said, Four!? ...[both laugh]...

Jones: You wanted to get out of here?

Bedford: I wanted to get out. Yeah, exactly.

Jones: Okay ... that’s a good story. Well, what ... from your memories, what’s your most vivid memory? Positive or negative, about the social life at Illinois Wesleyan?

Bedford: Well, the social life for most of the minorities there was almost like non-existent. I think the time I was there for the fourth year the maximum number of minorities or I should say African-Americans was probably 10. So most of the social life we were off campus and I remember just during my first winter I was invited to doing all of the fraternities and everything and of course, when I got there they forgot me and I never did get around. One of the same professor tried to pay my way to join but I told him I didn’t want to join.

Jones: Really?

Bedford: I would rather not... join. I wouldn’t care to take on the expenses.

Jones: -Were you invited? Or-

Bedford: -I was invited initially-

Jones: -Oh!

Jones: -Before they saw me. But when I got on campus I didn't get any more calls-

Jones: Okay!

Bedford: -to join the fraternity. And that's – that's really the most – about the social life. It was – it was non-existent really and they-

Jones: -Mm-hmm.

Bedford: And then outside activities or so, we'd go to maybe the basketball games and stuff that was mostly down to Illinois State.

Jones: Why – yeah that was my next question. What type of activities did you do?

Bedford: But – I mean – you know, we – you know we had a lot of friends there at Wesleyan and in fact my roommate, I'd just go home with him. He lived in Paxton. He told me a story about – he said, "You know they've still got all the books they've got- you know – no negros can stay in town overnight." ...[giggles]... I looked at him-

Jones: Really?

Bedford: -Yeah he would say we just want the books and I used to go stay overnight at his parent's house in Paxton.

Jones: All right.

Bedford: And he would just mention and we would just laugh about it-

Jones: -What was his name?

Bedford: Jack Thomson. He also played football out there at Wesleyan.

Jones: Was he your roommate all four years?

Bedford: No. I had switched up not only – in fact – I don't even remember my roommates really but I know Jack was my roommate one time. They mixed it up. They didn't just put us together like Rey and I were never – I don't think we were never roommates except for first semester and we were living off-campus for a little while.

Jones: Mm-hmm.

Bedford: -Other than that they did ...(incomprehensible)...

Jones: So now are you and Rey from the same high school?

Bedford: Same high school.

Jones: Okay.

Bedford: Yeah. Same neighborhood, same high school.

Jones: Okay. Were you – you mentioned sports, not being in fraternities but were you involved in other student organizations on campus or clubs or anything like that?

Bedford: Yeah, the football team. I was in a football team and also on the track team and I really wanted to be on the bask – the basketball team but that's a long story and I – and that really left a lot of bitterness in me towards Illinois Wesleyan but-

Jones: -Well, expand... expand on that if you can

Bedford: Well, actually I – I – I was – I felt better in basketball than football but you know, as kids-

Jones: Mm-hmm.

Bedford: -but when I got there and, that's one of the reasons I came here, because he said, "Well, the starting guards would be seniors when you're here," and we were just freshmen and you could play first string for the next three years. Well, my first year out there I just came up from football, they were already playing basketball so I thought I was doing pretty good. In fact – but I knew I wasn't doing pretty good at first but muscles are different, you know, we got quick muscles in basketball and then football, you have more elongated type muscles so ... at first, few weeks or so I was – I thought I wasn't doing too well but I was on first team junior varsity which dressed with the varsity. And then it came close to Christmas and then I thought I was getting better but I worked on the second team and then eventually I wasn't even dressing with the varsity and they put up the traveling squad and at that time we were going to the southern schools and black players could not go.

Jones: Were you the only black player-

Bedford: -I was the only one there. Rey was the only one as good as I was, but he didn't want to play

Jones: Okay.

Bedford: So that's when the same professor came to me and he said, "You know, I've been telling Jack Hoernberger that – you know you shouldn't sign these contracts because one day you might have a negro on the team and you know, that would be embarrassing."

Jones: Mm-hmm.

Bedford: So I didn't know anything about why I was going down. I thought I was doing pretty good. And he said, "Oh, you're better than these guys that they have on the list," this was the professor telling him. He said, "But you can't go." And I was like, Okay... says, "No, you can't go. The whole team will forfeit. You can't go there with them." So I didn't say anything to Hornberger but I was really bitter and I said to myself I'm not playing anymore. So-

Jones: -Wait, was this a university rule or was it a national rule... at that time?

Bedford: It was a national rule you couldn't make it against the Mississippi Southern's and all those schools.

Jones: Okay.

Bedford: Blacks can just participate. Play...

Jones: -Oh!

Bedford: -against them, with them –or whatever – couldn't go to school with them, couldn't play against them. . So anyway what happened was that... I told Hornberger that ... I wasn't man enough to stand up and tell him what I felt, so I tell him I don't think I'm gonna play basketball and he said, "why?" I said, "well, I'm too busy." So, what do you mean busy? I said, "Well, I got – I'm the dorm counselor and I work for (11:13??) and I'm a dorm counselor for my room as his, what you could take one of those. You know, I'm playing football and I'm being bad at basketball so maybe you need to take one of these jobs". No, we can't do that... as well. I'm not playing basketball. So he said, okay and then about after Christmas the guys come over, you know, coach said are you coming over or no? what's wrong? I said, No. I told him I quit. What do you mean you quit? I said, I quit... 'cause I'm not playing. So... the whole basketball team over there (11:51??) I'm not playing. And I didn't play. That was the end of that and – but he went on to – Rey Morgan was a baseball player but he told Rey flat out that he came up for baseball team that would stop the guys from going to Florida on their spring vacation to play baseball. So Rey did play baseball. So always add up-

Jones: -So that was a national thing – the baseball ...[overlapping]...

Bedford: Rey played baseball. I didn't play baseball.

Jones: Right but I mean that was a national sort of unwritten rule-

Bedford: -yeah when they went south-

Jones: -oh-

Bedford: -when they went south to all these southern schools. You couldn't even play in the school ...[overlapping]... right. And this was just – with no rule – it was just school rules and if you – like if the northern schools if you go and participate then you know you can't bring in black players would you participate otherwise your team can't participate.

Jones: Right.

Bedford: Right.

Jones: Did you ever – whether while you were still a student or after you left Illinois Wesleyan any time- did you ever have a conversation with Jack Hornberger?

Bedford: Nope. Nope.

Jones: -about the whole issue?

Bedford: Nope. Nope.

Jones: You never did?

Bedford: No. I didn't think it would do any good anyway so I did not want to get myself all hot and heated and angry about it 'cause I don't – I was bitter about it but I never did tell him anything about it.

Jones: Okay. I'm gonna shift here just a little bit.

Bedford: Okay.

Jones: I will ask you about what connections you had with the Bloomington-Normal community. Did you know the people in town?

Bedford: I did. But I had forgotten most of them. I – we used to – in fact, I stayed with – I think I can't remember her name – off-campus – when we first got in as freshmen-

Jones: -yeah-

Bedford: -we didn't have any place to stay so we stayed off-campus with a black family – Rey and I.

Jones: But now – was it or not housing on campus or why did you -

Bedford: - No, I don't know. We came back. Football started before the campus was open.

Jones: Right.

Bedford: -was open at all so it wasn't that we couldn't stay on them-

Jones: -right-

Bedford: -we – we were – no one could stay in there that I know of-

Jones: -the campus was open-

Bedford: -It wasn't open. No.

Jones: Okay.

Bedford: -so we were staying off-campus and then staying off-campus we met a few local people that first year so that built up and we used to sometimes go to church-

Jones: -yeah-

Bedford: -in the city-

Jones: -yeah-

Bedford: -that kind of thing-

Jones: Okay. I was going to ask you if you went to the churches-

Bedford: -Yes-

Jones: -in town-

Bedford: -yes, we did.

Jones: You can tell – do you remember the names?

Bedford: No.

Jones: Okay ...[giggles]... that's all right. What residence hall did you live in? Do you remember?

Bedford: ... Did I stay in Magill...[giggles]...

Jones: If you don't remember, that's all right.

Bedford: No. no. I don't. I don't really – whatever it was I stayed in the same one..

Jones: Now when you finally declared your major, what was the first job you got after you left Illinois Wesleyan?

Bedford: Well, you know... when we decided that we were gonna be physical education instructors, there was a guy by the name of DeLario. He was assistant football coach and he later went on – I think Ohio – Miami of Ohio – something – somewhere, but anyway he went because he was an Italian. He came and he talked with us real- real candid-

Jones: -mm-hmm-

Bedford: -he said, "Look, you're- you and Rey- gonna have a really hard time getting a job when you leave." He said, "So you're juniors now. I'll start putting out feelers. Just tell me where you wanted to send your information and I'll start putting out feelers for you guys but you guys – you know – you gotta make sure that you got to put it out there otherwise you're not going to be – find a position." And that – I said, well such is why – you know you always get the largest cities and all that. He said, you guys are (15:24??) and you may have a chance. I said, "I doubt it." He said, "But I'll help." And as soon as we finished talking about that, he got transferred- or he left and went to his other college. So we were... without any real support-

Jones: -connection – mm-hmm – job -

Bedford: -anybody really pushing-

Jones: So how did you get your first job?

Bedford: Well, just – on our own writing. In fact... Don Larson tried to help me get one in Green Bay... and communication between myself and the administration there at Illinois Wesleyan goofed up and they didn't get my credentials in time. They knew all about me and they knew I was black in the whole bit (not sure, 16:06). But they had to have a instructor – like on this

particular day and all my material got there too late and they had to hire somebody, they said. And so – otherwise I would have been waiting in cold Green Bay during May... [laughs]

Jones: Okay. Okay. So that was your first-

Bedford: -that was my first but second was back in Rockford.

Jones: Mm-hmm.

Bedford: Rey went on too southern Illinois to get his Masters degree but I went back home and I applied for a job at Rockford West High School, which I graduated from. They had a assistant football coach, a assistant track coach and a P.E. teacher, which was almost like perfect.

Jones: -mm-hmm. Right.

Bedford: But another guy from Illinois Wesleyan that also went to Rockford West High School and played the opposite end that I played but he had flunked out the year before. He was a year ahead of me. He had flunked out, came back and I tutored him in anatomy and physiology-

Jones: -oh, wow-

Bedford: -so – yeah – so we both graduated at the same time so I don't have to tell you I've got the job, right? ...[laughs]

Jones: I figured he was a non-minority.

Bedford: Yes. And he got the job and I got a job there in Rockford – what you call bad boy school was – reformed school for bad boy. It was about 15 miles outside of Rockford. There was a Rockford Board of Education and I was – out there and I was teaching English, which was my worst subject and I had to go back to Rockford College – I went back to Rockford College to take 'how to teach English' 'cause I didn't know anything about teaching English so I went there and took – took – got enrolled in two classes in English because those kids were – they might have been – gotten bad or mean but they were sharp and I – I was standing in front of them so I did that.

Jones: Were these predominantly minority students-

Bedford: -yes-

Jones: -or all kinds of students?

Bedford: -There's all kinds of students but mostly minority.

Jones: Okay.

Bedford: But none of them took it that bad. None at all – most of them – none at all.

Jones: Okay.

Bedford: yeah – at that time.

Jones: Okay. Right. Now you mentioned – I know you were ...[overlapping]... of – two more questions.

Bedford: Okay.

Jones: How has attending Illinois Wesleyan contributed to who you are today, if it had at all?

Bedford: Well, I don't know if it really had but I know one thing – that when I went to take the test for board of education for minorities, I would try to tell the stories all times. About 30 guys from all over the United States lived in Chicago at the time teaching P.E. when there weren't very many minority that was certified-

Jones: -no, when did you take the class?

Bedford: -This is back in like '63.

Jones: Okay.

Bedford: So, 63-64, so it was about 30 of us and this guy was talking about – you know – we have to know somebody in Chicago to get a job and all that so – I don't think about it – you know – but I was working there as a sub, or whatever, and anyway making long story short, two of us made to Illinois Wesleyan to Illinois – the other guy who had passed the test went to Chicago State – it was in Chicago – Chicago Teachers College at the time – so, only two, and we got out of the test, the guys are talking about all answers – ah, I got it right (19:20-19:22??) but I took it about two years before I had taken it. They said I missed by 1 point so at the time I had gone back to studying anymore – this is all political and I know I passed it the first time. Second time I said I didn't pass it—but I passed-

Jones: -Oh, you did! ...[both laugh]... God!

Bedford: But I think it is kind of political. I think the guys that another people were – nobody else were from Illinois that failed the test, you know, all from [overlapping] other state-

Jones: -other state-

Bedford: -yeah.

Jones: Oh!

Bedford: They had to have a little bit to do it.

[3rd person talking to Bedford]

Jones: Last question. What – what volunteer activities are you involved in now?

Bedford: Well, I'm the president of the – a Basketball Coach Association in City of Chicago and I'm in the Board of Directors of the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association (20:21??) and most

of the things are in Bloomington. And right now they're doing – they deal almost directly with Wesleyan but their new facility-

Jones: -right.

Bedford: ...that's where we're having all, I think, IBCAs. I was president of a – what we have a local (20:37-20:38??) which is a local charitable kind of group that deals with athletes.

Jones: Oh, okay!

Bedford: And I'm on the Derostinly (not sure) – derostinly was a football player based in New England and got his (20:48??) in. (20:49-20:51??) at a Board of Directors for his organization.

Jones: Okay. And now this isn't on the questionnaire but you also featured coach in the documentary, Hoop –

Bedford: -Hoop Dreams

Jones: -Hoop Dreams, right!

Bedford: I don't even count that ...[both laugh]...

Jones: Though that was an outstanding accomplishment though-

Bedford: -Oh, yeah-

Jones: -how – how were you in the school selected?

Bedford: Well, see that was just – I just happened to be here. I was in the school, there was about these two kids that grew up on the West side and went to St. George and one of the kids at St. George is in Westchester happened to get put out or didn't – couldn't make it and came to Marshal - that they wanted to follow him anyway-

Jones: -okay-

Bedford: -and he turned out to be a good kid... with a lot of basketball ability, but probably not too interested in education.

Jones: Mm-hmm. Have you been – kept in touch with him?

Bedford: Oh, he's around all the time.

Jones: Oh, he is?

Bedford: Yeah. Right.

Jones: Okay, well I wanna thank you for your time but we have to get off to a ... Principal's meeting-

Bedford: -yeah, so I don't get fired

Jones: -Yeah ...[Bedford laughs]... But I do appreciate your time.

Bedford: No problem.

Jones: And I'll give you an update with the progress of this complete project once it's complete.
[overlapping]

Bedford: Great, then, Ms. Jones. Thank you very much dear.